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TOWARDS A NEW CONCEPT OF LEADERSHIP

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Abstract:

In the present work we have posited some necessary guidelines to reformulate an essential pillar of leadership: the relationship group-leader. The set of enunciations that are developed are meant to establish the basic principles of the theoretical interpretation of this essential phenomenon of social life. In most works dealing with leadership we usually find that texts are centred on the leader. However, the process possesses another member of even greater importance embodied in the social group that forms around him or her. Thus, social actors need to reach a higher degree of sociability and to express, amongst other things, needs and goals, and they look for them openly in a chosen representative. And he or she, in turn, must fulfil the expectations of the group. In other words, the asymmetry of said relationship is inverted. Moreover, at the leader's end, we must discern between the person and the "character". This is how the particular game of leadership unfolds. The resulting construct accounts for the construction of a significant social feat.

Key words: Leadership – Group – Leader – Character – Individual – Identification – Social construction

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Introduction

The phenomenon of leadership is one of the most widespread in society. It is possible to say that there is almost no social relationship in which, in some way or another, the capacity for leadership of one individual or group over the behaviour of another individual or group, is not present. For this reason, it should not come as a surprise that it be a recurrent event in most aspects of social life, from peer-to-peer relationships, the couple, the family, different kinds of associations, to the institutions and political, economical, business, union, military, religious, educational and other organizations.

The aim of this work is to cover all the necessary steps in order to reformulate an essential aspect of the afore-mentioned phenomenon: the relationship group-leader. To this end, a set of conceptualizations will be enunciated that will allow us to establish the main guidelines of the theoretical construction. The latter pinpoint the complexity of the subject, the contributions made by different authors, and lastly, the medullary character of leadership theory within the field of the social sciences.

1. A first approach to the concept of leadership

‘Leadership’ is a concept that, within the dominant theoretical and ideological frameworks, usually alludes to effects caused by the leader in different social contexts. In these formulations, it is a powerful figure that magnetizes and summons up people to achieve different goals, whether they are desirable or not. And the defining characteristics as to their morality or amorality, their honesty or manipulating behaviour, depend on the leader him- or herself, given the power that he or she wields

and the level of obedience he or she gets from his or her followers. Then, leadership is seen as the manifestation in individuals and groups, of a strong and charismatic personality, with a counselling and determinant capacity.

This phenomenon is usually presented by enunciating the personal characteristics shown, or at least, that should be shown, by the individual supposedly responsible for this process. But the lack of consensus regarding which these expected qualities should be, has turned this question into a long-drawn problem.

According to Spratt's view of the subject, we can find the reason for this in that the leader's defining attributes cannot be selected in the abstract, but that they are determined as a function of the needs felt by his or her followers (Spratt, 1967, pp. 29-30). For this reason, he states that it is absurd to pretend that the characteristics of a "basic school leader" should be the same as those expected in the case of a "group of striking workers". However, he shows that these considerations cannot be deemed as absolute and gives the following example. In his opinion, within the framework of a class society, children who are educated to give orders and be obeyed, will have a higher degree of self-confidence that, at a later point in time, will allow them to attain a leading position, in a more expeditious way than it is the case for those who lack these prerogatives. Likewise, he considers that it might be possible to set out a series of social situations and, within them, to determine what set of characteristics holds a certain superiority regarding leadership (Spratt, 1967, p. 30).

The role played by leaders in society raises unending discussions, as Young states. The main reason is that it seems difficult to pinpoint a human activity in which leadership is not present. What usually happens is that some people are singled out and become leaders while others limit themselves to listen, to submit themselves, and obey

the leader. This is why the author comes to the conclusion that the nature and function of leadership embody central problems in the field of social psychology and social sciences (Young, 1967, p. 39).

Gerth and Mills define leadership, in a broad sense, stating that “it is a relationship between the leader and the follower, whereby the leader influences others more than he is influenced by them: because of the leader, followers act or feel differently from what would happen under other circumstances” (Gerth y Mills, 1984, p. 373).

From a rather skeptical standpoint, Friedrich manifests that he is incapable of explaining leadership, and that perhaps he will never be able to. When thinking about great religious or spiritual leaders such as Luther or Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, he concludes that it is not difficult to accept that we are beholding fundamental “creative forces” of society, that operate through such “leaders”. In this sense, he posits that, on many occasions, researchers have tried to figure out which characteristics are at play in those who lead and to discover an “abstract and general model” of the attributes inherent in leadership. Thus, a large number of institutions of different types and social groups that try to choose their future “leader” assume that these characteristics are identifiable, despite the fact that there is a wide range of opinions about the features that make up the “capacity for leadership”. From the interpretation he makes of various studies dealing with this phenomenon, Friedrich comes to the following conclusion: the defining qualities of a leader are subject, to a large extent, to the circumstances in which leadership unfolds, particularly, those related to “the nature of the group and the task to be carried out” But, in spite of this, he considers that it is possible to explain some functional aspects of general character that

define the leader, such as, for instance: representativity, the capacity to find solutions, the ability to foresee future problems and prestige (Friedrich, 1981, pp. 229-231).

To a certain extent –Brown posits– the leadership process is characterized by the capacity to free itself from fixed structures, either to overcome hurdles and limits or to reconsider dispositions, with the object of defining in a given situation, the characteristics that were not present before. Frequently, the leader can fulfil his task in a very efficient way, just by recognizing the deep desire to remain within the established structure and seeking cooperation from someone who is not related to the activity, from an individual who does not approach the task driven by the constituted rule, which is a characteristic of those who are already partaking a given task. Browne holds that perhaps one of the values worthy of mentioning that are found in a temporary leader could be explained as follows: the capacity to counsel others in problem-solving situations without being limited by restrictions imposed through limiting barriers (Browne, 1969, p. 380).

Gouldner inquires into the reasons that nurture the possibility to discover certain traits that are common to all leaders, independently from whether they are or not real. At the same time, he stresses the lack of credible proof to indicate the existence of attributes inherent in leadership of a supposedly universal character. And, lastly, he draws his attention to a question that he thinks fundamental: he asks himself why it has not been possible to find certain characteristics that, even though not universal, they should be revealed, at least, in those leaders that are active in situations where the number of actors is over one or two, or groups over one or two. The cause lies – he underlines – in the fact that the traits that underlie leadership change as a function of two primordial factors: the situation or the group that is considered. There are no

defining qualities for leadership that are foreign to the particular context where the phenomenon takes place. On the contrary, it is the product of the interaction between the knowledge a person is endowed with and the circumstances this person must face in each case. Notwithstanding, this same author gives some consideration to the possibility of the existence of some attributes that may define the leader, which might be found in all leaders regardless of the situation in particular (Gouldner, 1969, pp. 68-74).

In the “paradigm for the study of leadership”, a diagram that tries to systematize the central aspects of the problem, Morris and Seeman start their analysis by describing the basic notion of what a leader is. They affirm that the classical answer to this question has been the following: “Leader is that individual who holds the position of leader. The leader of an organization is its president; the leader of an army is its general, and so on” (Morris y Seeman, 1950, p. 152). However, both authors recognize that these answers are inadequate when delving into more reasonable definitions of this question. Thus, they state that it is possible to designate by the name of leader the individual who:

“exerts more influence (or a stronger influence) than any other member; or he who has been chosen as their leader by the group; or he who exerts more influence on the definition or realization of the group’s objectives, to mention just a few of the numerous available definitions” (Morris y Seeman, 1950, p. 152).

Moreover, it is feasible that, according to a certain definition, a leader is designated as the individual who holds a high-level post. And, at the same time, he/she cannot be called leader until he/she has shown his or her capacity to transform

the group, i.e. to exert influence on it. Morris and Seeman have shown that identification of the leader constitutes a medullary issue in the study of leadership, especially because it refers to a frequent “stereotype”, common in North-American culture, to confer this condition to the one who holds the post (Morris y Seeman, 1950, p. 152).

Most papers dealing with the phenomenon under examination in environments such as business, the liberal professions or military careers, account for those characteristics that may be considered of the highest importance in the exercise of leadership and command. Thus, it is customary to draw lists of traits (Young, 1967, p. 53). With respect to these, Young coincides with Bird in that the most mentioned traits constitute stereotypes and supposedly “none of them has a negative or rejection-related meaning” (Bird, 1940)¹, On top of this, it is apparent –he affirms– that the degree of generality or particularity of the alluded trait list is variable, and that the terms are very similar to those used in routine exploratory studies of personality. Then, elaborating on this previous research work, Young posits the following presumption:

“It is a plausible hypothesis to consider that almost all traits that are entered with higher-than-average frequency, might be used to characterize a leader” (Young, 1967, pp. 53-54).

The search for leaders has usually been oriented – according to Gibb – towards the finding of individuals with certain well-developed traits. Moreover, leadership has been regularly thought of as:

¹ Bird, Ch. (1940). *Social Psychology*. New York: Appleton – Century, pp. 378-379. Op.cit. in Young (1967, p. 53).

“A specific attribute of personality, a personality trait that some people have and others do not, or at least, that some people acquire to a high degree and others only scarcely” (Gibb, 1960, p. 57).

In his widely known study on the subject, Gibb affirms that leadership is not defined by any personality or character trait at all. It is a social role whose adoption is subject to a number of capacities and traits, though at an earlier stage, to the particular social circumstances in which there is one or more problems to be solved. The individual will be able to assume the role of leader according to the goal the group wants to achieve, but in addition (it is noteworthy) according to the capacity of the leader to make it a reality. Regarding this last aspect, he states, returning to Du Vall (1943)², that a general aspect of leadership resides in that the person who is above other people in all aspects, is also the one who most frequently, is in condition to deliver the expected contribution (Gibb, 1960, p. 60-61).

The different approaches to the concept of leadership that have been put forward thus far do not exhaust, in any way, the plethora of formulations that have been written on the subject; they are rather representative of rich contributions made to “uncover” a particularly complex process such as the one we intend to analyse. However, all of them have a common denominator: the epicentre of the phenomenon would seem to be invariably in the person of the leader, to the detriment of the group.

2. On the particular “group-leader” relationship

² Du Vall, E. W. (1943). *Personality and Social Group Work*. New York: Association Press. Op.cit. in Gibb (1960, p. 60).

Current theories on leadership present the social relationship with a dominant pole – the leader – and at the other end, adherent and trustful social groups. Thus, we have the principal term: the leader, and its secondary derivations. This postulate is a consequence of the fact that the leader is explicit and exposed, taking into account that he personalizes the relationship.

In this unilateral conception, the leader must have a certain amount of charisma³ and knowledge, deftly combined, to be able to summon and win over the others. From this, a basic premise can be deduced that is directly proportional: the greater the increase in magnitude of both qualities (charisma and knowledge), the greater will the achievements in attraction and following be.

However, the appreciations enunciated above reveal that there are interesting contributions and some truth in them, but, at the same time, they manifest limited and biased advances, with some load of error and fantasy. Indeed, there are examples where it is possible to notice this strange and powerful force that seems to emanate from the leader, and also those in which one can watch enthusiastic crowds, dazzled, ready to be guided and in some cases even manipulated, with different degrees of consensus and devotion.

However, these assertions, despite their good points, present some difficulties related to approach, false asymmetry and concealment that preclude the discovery of the true problem of leadership.

³ Weber states that “charisma must be interpreted as that quality, which is seen as extraordinary (magically conditioned in its origin, whether it applies to prophets or sorcerers, arbitrators, hunting chiefs or military chiefs), of a personality, by virtue of which an individual is considered to be in possession of supernatural or superhuman forces – or at least specifically out of the ordinary and unattainable by others, or as a God-send or exemplary individual and, consequently as head, chief, guide or leader” (Weber, 1980, p. 193).

The understanding of this phenomenon requires a Copernican turn, without disregarding the value of earlier work, but assigning to them a new meaning, in so far as it posits a new interpretation of the position of the individual-leader in his or her relationship with the group. For this reason, it is essential to formulate the following questions and clarifications with the objective of shedding light on certain advances and possibilities.

2.1 Superiority of the leader?

It is convenient to start the analysis with the following hypothesis: the word “leader” is overrated and appears as the hub that generates the phenomenon of leadership. The person-individual, irradiating subject, thinks of him-/herself as being in a privileged place. And this place seems to have a special glitter. A glow that steams and conceals the other pole in the relationship: the group.

2.1 Relationship leader-group

Leadership is the product of a particular social relationship between a person and a group. This individual expresses and represents collective projections and is the result of a choice, whether conscious or not, and also made by the group. The group builds a “social type” and the person in question assumes the role. This is where a fundamental difference appears. The group creates the social type it needs and, in this, differentiates itself from other social types. In turn, the person who takes up this role must limit him-/herself to these demands, this setting, to this demand of sociability, on penalty of being ignored. It is evident that this individual must have certain characteristics considered acceptable by the group for the social type, but also, that the type will modify and add

those that will allow positive identification; and this, then, will contribute to the “operations” of this relationship.

The group creates an original social type called leader. And the originality lies in that each leadership relation is specific to the expressed group project; and, on top of this, in that certain qualities of the person-individual also mold and give personality to the social type. Therefore, the leader’s tacit order will be to restrict him-/herself to the “socio-cultural type” and, in this regard, his or her followers will behave in an inflexible and constant manner towards him or her.

Every leader has, on the other hand, a fair knowledge of the image he represents for his followers. Strictly speaking, he has an image of an image. That is, there is an image of the leader with respect to his/her leadership and there is another of those who are led with respect to their leader. But there is no reason to expect them to be identical nor that one should be the mirror-image of the other. Therefore, the leader knows he/she has only his/her own image of what is expected from him or her.

However, he/she is never sure if this image is identical to the other one. That is why his/her behaviour is characterized by trial-and-error steps; by day-to-day learning and acquisition of experience; by focused reading of the slightest signs from his/her followers. However, he/she also knows that it is a sort of mirror game. As Borges states when he writes about fame: “that reflection of dreams is the dream of another mirror” (Borges, 1994, p. 308). Leadership seems to be a similar case. In that mirror game, when there is dissonance and asynchrony, the message comes late, sometimes too late. The leader possesses great intuition, but he/she never knows with precision where the boundary between what he/she is allowed to do and what it is forbidden to him or her, lies. It is an extremely weak boundary, built by the followers, but that is not clearly

defined, not even for themselves. Boundary violation only shows when it takes place, without previous notice. Therefore, moves and relationship between leader and group become subtle and mysterious. This is how it is born, how it grows and extinguishes, without any well-defined molds, without any foreseeable end (Labourdette, 1987, pp. 137-140; 2003, pp. 151-152).

Leader and followers permanently adapt their expectations and behaviour on a mythical ground. But even if this ground ensures adhesion and fecundity, in addition to a strong emotional element, it does not guarantee a fixed and eternal territory. There are amplifications and reductions as time goes by. And there are also desertions, apart from dissolution and disappearance of said ground. At some point this leadership may become orphaned, either because of fatigue, cooling of relations or discrepancies between the parties. And sometimes it is not the consequence of doing something different from what is expected: but of doing the same, because what was earlier accepted becomes, all of a sudden, strange and unacceptable. The fact is that something and someone have changed. But nobody seems to realize this until it happens (Labourdette, 2003, p. 152).

3. Deconstructing the concept of leadership

The relationship “group-leader” is a concept that intends to explain in a different way, with another theoretical framework, this social phenomenon called leadership. We start by accepting that we are facing one of the most important events that take place in the life of human societies. Besides, it is possible to find examples of leadership in all instances of social life, from the familiar and educational contexts to the economical and political arenas.

The concept group-leader and its corresponding theory present the occurrence as a social “relationship”. Or, in other words, it may be seen as a particular game played by different actors. This social relationship implies the existence of a series of primary elements reciprocally interrelated. But we must begin by recognizing that it is a kind of social relationship formed by two medullary elements: group and leader, where each of them has its corresponding level of importance and precedence. This statement implies the following: an order in an asymmetric equilibrium of opposite sign to the usually proposed, as it stresses the first term.

Therefore, each phenomenon associated with leadership is peculiar in certain aspects and commonplace in others and it may become extinct if any of the two poles deserts, especially if the group does, by virtue of its status as basis and support of the relationship. However, when the personal pole disappears, the relationship falls into a crisis as those who project the image are left without their original mirror, even if they may overcome its absence with certain mechanisms of great social importance: myths, remembrances and ceremonies, or, as Weber states, by means of the process of transforming “charisma into a routine” and bureaucratic organization (Weber, 1980, pp. 847-889; pp. 193-204). And the social relationship always turns into failure when the group leaves, dissipates or ends up rejecting the condition of leader. This is because leadership is invariably a particular social state, where some social crowd becomes a new grouping, network, “social fact”, “movement”, “political or religious force”, etc., by using its presumptive leader as its reference point and as an element of unity in his name. Even in outstanding personalities like Ghandi, Mahoma, Tutankhamón o Peter I, el Grande, it is possible to perceive this phenomenon, as well as in leaders of lesser importance, whether at intermediate, local or neighbourhood level. The social product

has value at the origin and in the result of leadership. The “individual” puts his seal to a certain degree, but nothing exists if it is not accepted by a “social group” and its constructed “type” and if those qualities and qualifications that this individual usually lacks, are not attributed to him. Moreover, if these persons, who have become leaders, had hidden themselves or become lost, without integrating themselves to history, nobody would have known or anointed them and no effect would have been perceived. And when every possible leader makes his appearance, we may suppose that there are already social currents fighting to defend their claims and desire to overcome pain and losses and to find myths, emblems, prophets, tales, etc., capable of helping them to join up, to give structure to said currents; and thus to obtain the expected social recognition. The group’s projection as well as and the effect of mutual identification that it achieves through the person’s “identity type” are powerful. Hence, it becomes interesting to compare the quantity and quality of traits a leader seems to possess, according to his/her followers’ opinions, with the less committed view of an observer or even more distant of an adversary. These differences reveal the social character of this individual as far as he is socially constructed. Because charisma, in these cases, is not only a gift, a quality or the leader’s own magnetism. It is rather an attribute endowed by others, and not by God or other divine creation. It is the attribute from a collective being.

The social element in leadership is so strong that when the group of followers deserts their leader, it symbolically kills him/her as such. This fact is socially more powerful than physical death itself, since in this latter form of disappearance, the leader can be remembered and even grow as a social myth, whereas in the symbolic death, he/she is set aside and deleted from memory. He or she ceases to be an object of group identification to become a mere individual even if they keep their primordial qualities

intact. And the once spiritual or political guide is demoted to an individual-person status, one more among the crowd. Precisely, his/her symbolic condition was one of the two sides in the social relationship, which then broke, with the group. The leader is only a socio-cultural archetype, endowed with the presumptive or real qualities attributed to him/her by the group. And it lasts for as long as the relationship does. This peculiar social phenomenon tends to be deceptive because only one pole glows, in general, to the detriment of the other. However, the group's grey pole gives the other pole the light of recognition. And it is this "opaque social light" what feeds or destroys leadership and its leader.

At this point it is convenient to reflect on the following premise: the first attribute of a society consists in its capacity for self-construction and projection through time and then, for the construction of other institutions, of other social phenomena. Amongst the different theoretical perspectives that bear reference on this subject, Luhmann (1960) states that societies self-replicate through their condition of autopoietic systems. This quality sheds light on how something is made. Berger and Luckmann (1968) go along the same lines when they hold that reality is socially built. Likewise, other authors, amongst whom we may include Schutz (1974), Castoriadis (1993), Searle (1997), Habermas (1984), Giddens (1967), etc., have expressed similar support for the role of society in the production of innumerable social constructions. And one of these is, doubtlessly, leadership. Indeed, this construct of bipolar relationship and in particular its character turned leader, does not either turn up spontaneously from nature, or finds its source in the peculiar characteristics of an individual, despite the fact that

these might deserve some consideration. Leadership is a socio-cultural phenomenon that transcends any individual quality, even if it exists and is included.

Therefore, it stands to reason to uphold the following enunciation: leadership is the result of a construction carried out by a group that, in turn, within this process of identification, reconstructs itself as such. Group identity and leader projection, goals and needs constitute the hidden matrix of a societal-individual phenomenon that is poorly understood and wrongly conceived.

Lastly, we cannot leave out from this analysis the notion of power, as in fact, it is an essential component of any kind of leadership. This phenomenon constitutes rather a particular form of power. Despite this, an adequate development of this concept would largely exceed the objectives laid out for the present work.

4. General Conclusions

The proposal of the complex “group-leader” upheld in the present work, has intended to deconstruct and restore a more precise vision of leadership, to reinstate an inverted tone asymmetry and to recover a hidden value in the social plot of the phenomenon dealt with in these pages. The main focal points of the proposed theoretical construction are listed below:

- I. The usual vision of leadership is centred on the person of the leader. But this leader is only an agent in a social construction. The crux of the matter lies then in the art of constructing sociability. For this purpose, it is necessary to invert the terms in order to correctly understand this phenomenon.
- II. The leader becomes an agent in the events that are taking place around him, given that social actors require a higher level of sociability. And he/she should

fulfil the group's expectations, under penalty of suffering a symbolic death or, in some cases, a material one.

- III. The salient point of this phenomenon consists in the capacity to integrate people that identify through a leader. However, when he/she ceases to act as the person who embodies the values, goals and interests claimed by those he/she represents, leadership starts to wane or even disappear due to changes in the original social conditions.
- IV. The individual shares leadership when he occupies a role. This is because, strictly speaking, the leader is not only a person but primarily a "character", a category that is the result of a social construction. The evidence lies in that, amongst other things, his/her followers project on him/her qualities that are often an imaginary, and sometimes even surprising, product.
- V. In virtue of the fact that leadership constitutes a focal point in social construction, on some occasions, it outlives the leader, precisely because it is a process that transcends him/her. In this sense, it is necessary to recognize the particular importance of the group, the other pole embodied in the social group that forms around the leader.
- VI. The social group is endowed with a force that exceeds that of the leader. And although it might look a contradiction, it has a greater capacity for command, as it compels the leader to behave as expected and not to depart from his/her role. The group compels him/her to play the character, under penalty of rejection or oblivion. The group owns the recognition of the leader. And he/she knows that without this recognition he/she ceases to exist. The paradox is that, despite this superiority, quite often it looks as though the leader is the one who can do things

his/her own way, lead the group as he/she thinks fit. But this possibility does not match the real equation of power.

- VII. The first action the group wishes and needs to carry out is to congregate around the leader and, hence, to consolidate in its identification and express its demands. This is the main function that is frequently overlooked. The chosen leader becomes then an instrument for identification and acceptance of his/her role, although he/she might develop the capacities of his/her own personality, as long as these do not fall into contradiction with or discredit the constructed character.

The leadership game, once reconceptualised, shows that it is a key social feat, as it constructs different types of sociability and projection. And it also integrates, and at the same time, transcends the individual. Ultimately, leadership sets in motion a social force that operates at all levels, in all spheres, age groups and activities of human life.